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## Digi-Housekeeping: A new form of digital labour?

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“It’s my first email download and look what I’ve got. It’s a full screen of emails to deal with.[...] A lot of them are rubbish, but you’ve still got to sort the rubbish” [Jez, social entrepreneur].

In this paper, we examine a form of digital labour illustrated in the above quote that we label ‘digi-housekeeping’. This is work performed by individuals that supports their use of modern communication technologies, in particular those that sustain ‘being online’ across all aspects of their lives. Such work is often carried out in pursuit of different forms of ‘flexible’ working but nevertheless problematizes traditional binary domains of ‘work’ and ‘life’.

There is increasing interest in the role of these technologies in the process of segmenting and/or integrating the domains of work and life (Duxbury et al., 2014). The concept of digital labour emerges from media studies (Scholz, 2012; Fuchs, 2014) often highlighting a Marxist theory concern regarding the relationship between unpaid digital labour (by individuals) and the production of value (to organizations). Initially conceived as the creative work of individuals expended on the social web, digital labour arises from the impact of digital technologies which erode traditional distinctions between work and play online (Burston et al, 2010). These technologies reinforce the provision of such labour without payment (Ross, 2012), prompting it to be likened to ‘those less visible, unsung forms of traditional women’s labor such as childcare [and] housework’ Scholz (2012; p2). The analogy of female domestic work is further extended by conceptualizing insecure work requiring spatio-temporal flexibility as having been ‘housewifized’ (Fuchs, 2014).

Our research approach regards ‘work’ and ‘life’ not as reified entities but rather as constructions reinforced and renegotiated in the course of daily interactions; they are socially constructed and contested domains (Cohen et al., 2009). This recognises that social, political and epistemological choices determine what is defined as work and ‘not work’ (Okhuysen et al., 2013).

Our data is drawn from 45 participants from three UK based groups: social entrepreneurs (mostly self-employed and working from home); office workers (who mostly utilise flexible working options such as job share, compressed hours or working at home one day a week), and students (aged 18-25 including some working towards a PhD). After a briefing session, each participant kept a week’s video diary of any ‘switching’ between roles they noted across different aspects of their lives, narrating a commentary as they filmed. They made their own decisions as to what constituted a ‘switch’ for them. ‘Switches’ could be between or within their digital/physical domains and of any time duration. At the end of the week, participants were debriefed and returned the video recordings. They then attended a recorded interview to discuss excerpts from their video data and to embed these discussions in a more in-depth understanding of the participants’ lives, exploring their own constructions of work-life balance, switches and technology use.

Our initial findings suggest an ‘online’ domain is constructed through use of mobile digital technology, eroding many boundaries between the traditional domains of work and personal or home life which now co-exist. Intrigued by existing domestic work analogies, we termed the role or tasks to support this as ‘digi-housekeeping’. Whereas the function of the domestic housekeeper is to ensure the smooth running of the household, digi-housekeeping focuses on maintaining the smooth running of the participant’s engagement with the online domain and other requirements of ‘flexible’ working.

Domestic housekeeping focuses on the internal aspects of the house such as cleaning, tidying, organizing storage, provisioning, and attending to wear and tear of domestic items. To the outside world, such work is often invisible and, when done for ourselves, is unpaid. We argue that digi-housekeeping is similarly hidden and unrewarded; it involves similar tasks to support ‘being online’ across the traditional domains of work and personal life. Inboxes need to be cleaned of junk mail, emails tidied into meaningful folders, digital equipment must be maintained and replaced when it breaks down or becomes out-of-date, file storage requires organizing, gadgets made ready for use, and time and money is invested in the pursuit of

what is 'new and better' that promise greater online efficiency. But who is this work done for and who benefits?

At conference, we will unpack this question and the concept of digi-housekeeping as a form of digital labour. Our initial findings will be developed to explore further the digi-housekeeping practices of our three participant groups, thus extending the occupational settings in which the 'housewifization' of work has been considered. We will locate these within wider debates such as the engagement by the social entrepreneurs with the 'digital reputation economy' and by all participants with managing 'the contemporary flexible self' (Hearn, 2010, pp 424-9). In doing so, we examine the re-conceptualization of work when work and life are contested as naturally occurring domains.